

University of Dundee

## The Performativity of Painting

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The Performativity of

# P A I N T I N G

A choreographed meeting

Artists:

Tobias Buckel

Liz Elton

David Lock

J.A. Nicholls

Selma Parlour

James Pimperton

Rebecca Molloy

Alex Roberts

*Painting – the performance of structures, fragments and use of space within the perceived painted frame, and the relating inherent surround.* Curator: Alex Roberts

The Stephen Lawrence Gallery,  
University of Greenwich Galleries

16 January - 16 February 2018



In his polemical 1965 essay 'Modernist Painting', Clement Greenberg famously writes: 'Where the Old Masters created an illusion of space into which one could imagine oneself walking, the illusion created by a Modernist is one into which one can only look, can travel through only with the eye'.<sup>1</sup> This drive toward *opticality* came at a cost: a denial of the embodied space of reception as a contributory factor in the encounter with the painting. Yet postmodern challenges to Greenberg and Michael Fried, valorising the haptic and situated nature of the so-called 'literal' encounter with an artwork, often abandoned the very possibility of painting as an avant-garde medium. Within a post-conceptual and post-aesthetic art context, the medium-specificity of painting was not only seen as outmoded, but its supposed ocularcentrism complicit with dominant ideologies. This, in effect, conceded the notion that painting, as Greenberg and Fried claimed, was, indeed, an autonomous form requiring no bridges to the spectator.

Correspondingly, Greenberg's schematic categorisation of the 'illusory' space of representation painting—a space into one could imagine walking—was never, in and of itself, challenged. And yet 'situated' painting has always structured what Sven Sandström terms *levels of unreality*.<sup>2</sup> By way of example, in situ religious art throughout the Renaissance was intensely concerned with the depiction of celestial realms within the problematic posed by perspectival forms of representation: it was never simply an art of illusion that one could straightforwardly 'imagine oneself walking', but rather one that imposed barriers to participation demanded by the necessary distance required of the religious image. The integration of a work's framing into its inner and outer reality—the implied virtual space and its real architectural context—was one means by which Renaissance artists constructed a dynamic between a painting's internal coherence (the reciprocity of gestures and looks contained within the painted scene) and its sense of being completed by the embodied presence of a beholder.<sup>3</sup>

Might the space of reception, in a contemporary context, still be brought into the remit of the imaginative engagement with the situated work? This is the theatricality so derided

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<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist Painting', in *Art and Literature* no. 4, spring (1965): 193-201. Reprinted in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*: 5-10 (London: The Open University, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Sven Sandström, *Levels of Unreality: Studies in Structure and Construction in Italian Mural Painting during the Renaissance* (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> See Alois Riegl, *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (Los Angeles, California: Getty Research Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999).



by Fried, yet so central to painting as an *in situ* form, conceived for a particular site. This exhibition, entitled *The Performativity of Painting*, seeks to reclaim such derided notions of 'theatricality' or 'staging', in order to activate the site of reception. If painting is here conceived as performative, then it is because it does something to, or demands something of, the beholder. We are implicated by the virtual world of the painting, such that our orientation—spatial *and* ideational—is brought into play. Performative utterances, after all, demand a witness to register the promise, the instruction, the naming; the witness is a guarantor of the 'illocutionary force' of performative utterances—their intentional force.

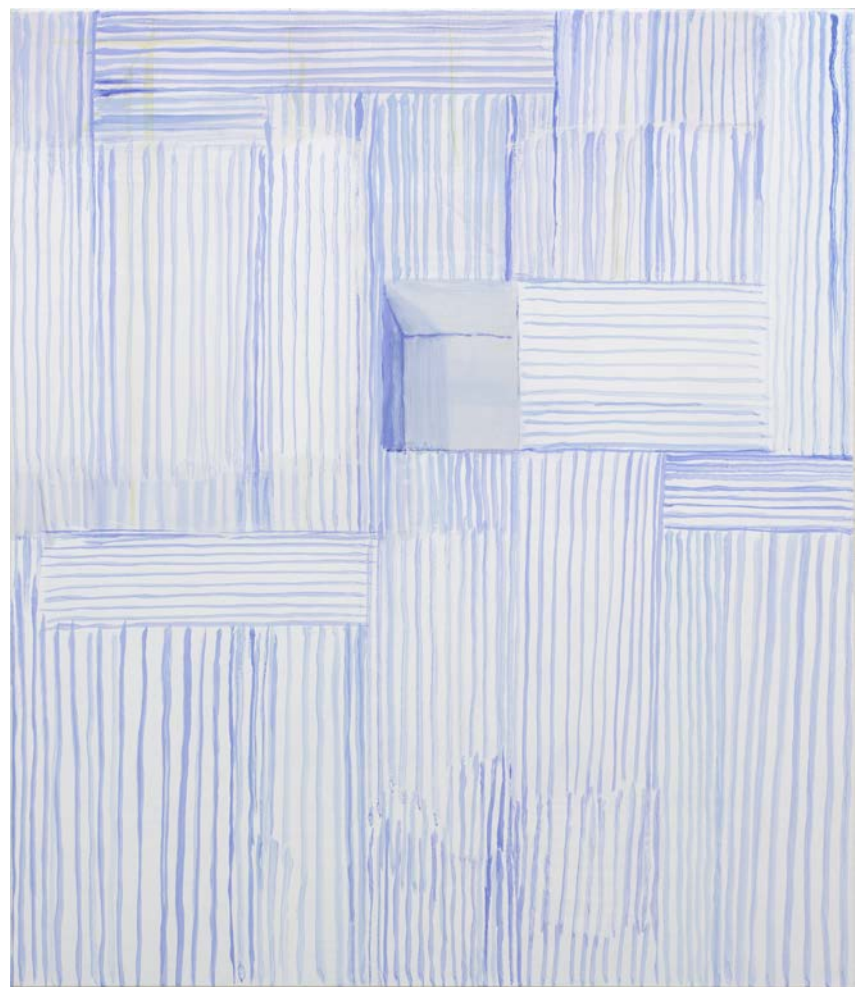
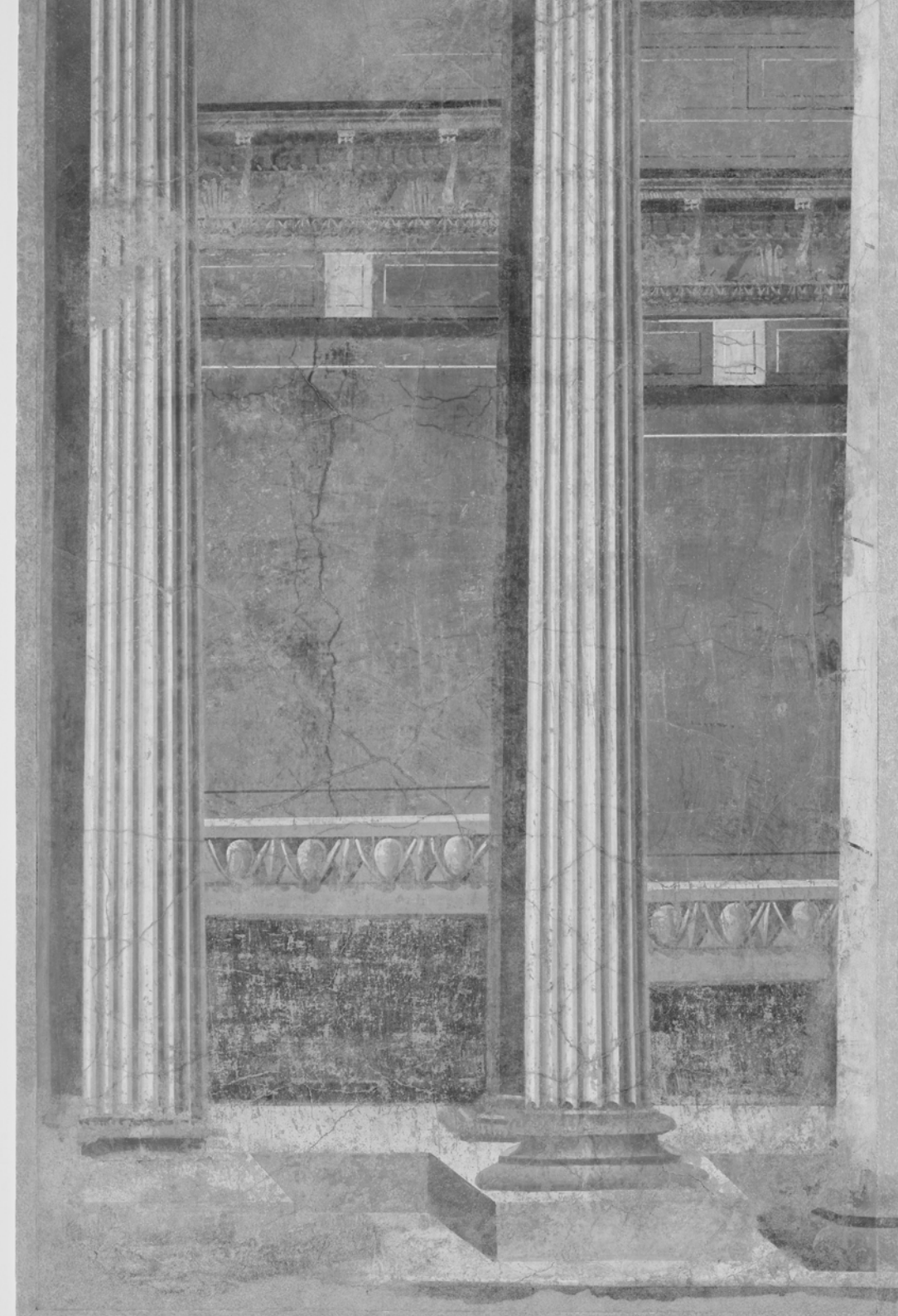
In Judith Butler's reinterpretation of J. L. Austin's original terminology, the reiterative power of performative discourse is dependent upon conventions and ideologies implicit to our social world;<sup>4</sup> if contemporary painting might be thought of as performative, then perhaps it is because it tests these constraints. Thus considered, the painting provides cues for how we are to orientate oneself, in order to place oneself into a direct experiential connection with its content—where its signifiers are understood in terms of a viewing process conceived as a socially situated act. This might be through a palpable awareness of the viewer's gaze, or through an ambiguity of surface, or a work removed from the constraints of the gallery wall, or a choreographed juxtaposition of different works. Though the work in this exhibition is diverse, each artist seeks to solicit such responses, and to implicate the viewer as an embodied presence.

## KEN WILDER

Dr. Ken Wilder is an artist and writer. Having practiced and taught architecture, he now makes site responsive installations and films. Based at Chelsea College of Arts, he is the University of the Arts Reader in Spatial Design. He has published widely on issues of reception aesthetics, including Bloomsbury's 2016 anthology *Painting: Critical and Primary Sources*.









Painting – the performance of structures, fragments and use of space within the perceived painted frame, and the relating inherent surround.

*'An experience of an artwork is an embodiment of space, within the work and around the work - the experience of the temporal.'*<sup>1</sup>

Lindsay Seers summarizes (above) what is intangible about engaging with art, and shares similar concerns with painting's concentration. Although Seers works predominantly in film and installation, her point accentuates a parallel movement that seems to be presently trending in painting - the re-questioning of how paintings are formed and displayed.

In bringing together these artists, through their distinct individual accounts and methodologies, the exhibition, *The Performativity of Painting* offers the opportunity to consider site-specificity, theatrical tropes, depicted surfaces, staging and the interconnectedness of the artwork's context (in the works' content and proximity). In this sense, the exhibition will seek to address painting's embodiment of the performative space.



Curator: Alex Roberts

<sup>1</sup> Lindsay Seer's commentary, elevated from the final panel discussion of the conference, 'Folds in Time: Artists' Responses to the Temporal and the Uncanny', hosted by The Freud Museum, 4th July 2015. Part of The Freud Museum's Festival of the Unconscious.











Everything in nature develops gradually, step by step and organically. Tarmac, television screens, office cubicles and glazed doughnuts are the materials of our time and we are growing with them:

Once upon a time there were bodies that worshipped plants. These plants provided these bodies with sustenance, minerals, nutrients and life. These plants were sacred, they were nurturing, healing, powerful and plentiful. But now instead of growing and anchoring themselves into the ground, these plants are potted and placed next to television screens or on top of refrigerators. They are exotic and homely all at once.

When we put our hands in soil, dopamine is released in the brain. This is so that when

we need to go out and gather food, we feel good about the action, ensuring that we will survive another day in the wilds of the world. The same release of chemicals happens when we receive likes on Instagram.

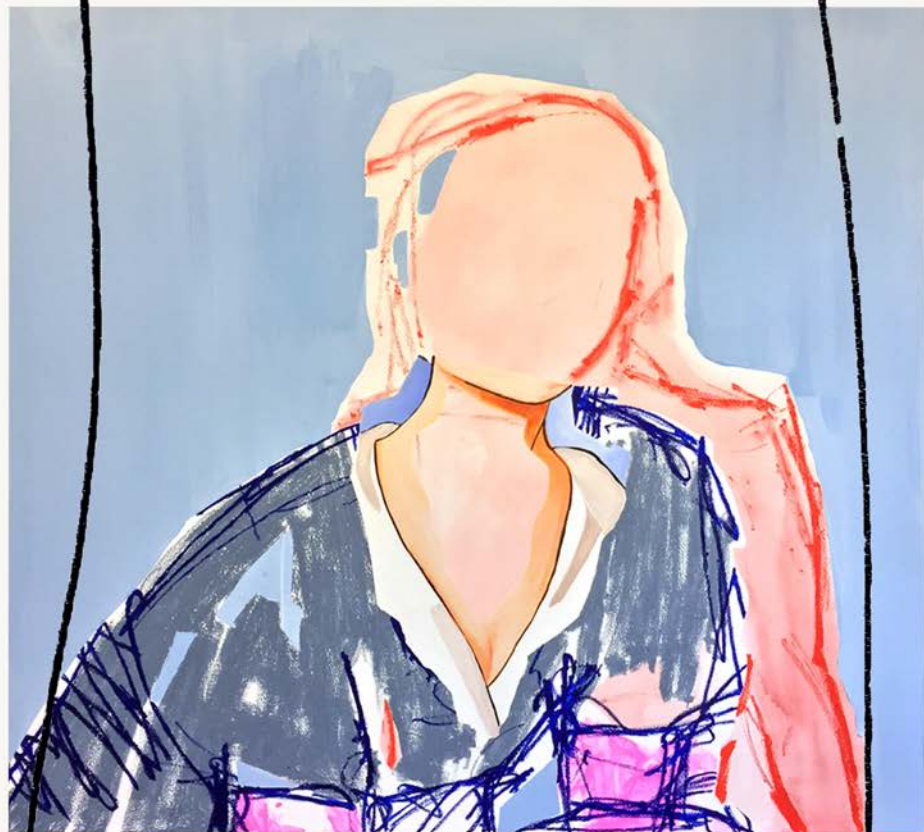
You will never see yourself fully in three dimensions. Only others will. You will only ever know yourself as an image through the screens, mirrors and reflections of the world. Perhaps it is more important to feel and be in your body, more than it is to think about it.

Once upon a time in the future, life will be a journey of feeling.

Excerpt from *Where There Are Females There Are Flowers*, written by Rebecca Molloy 2017



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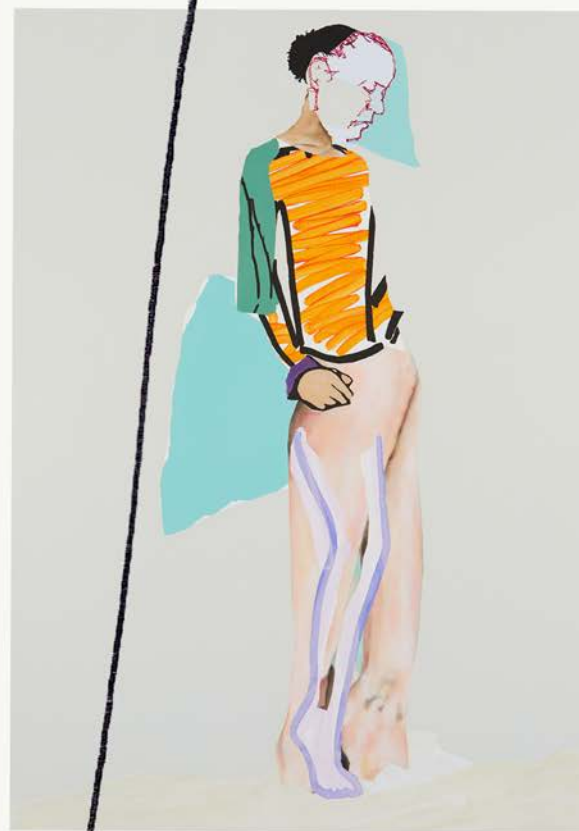
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We would like to thank David Waterworth and his team at The Stephen Lawrence Gallery, University of Greenwich Galleries, Dr. Ken Wilder and all artists.

Featured artworks:

**Tobias Buckel**

Work reference: Wall painting from Room F of the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale ca. 50–40 B.C., The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. P. 6

*Recess*, 2017, vinyl colour on canvas, 110 x 95cm. P. 7

**Liz Elton**

*One Hundred Harvests*, 2017, water miscible oil on compostable material with silk thread. Inside front cover and inside back cover

**David Lock**

All works 2017. *Chris (Horst)*, oil on canvas, 31 x 23cm. P. 10

*Garden*, oil on canvas, 31 x 26cm, part of *Looted*, inkjet collage, dimensions variable (installation view). P. 11

**J.A. Nicholls**

All works 2017. *alas*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 109 x 120cm.

*untitled*, 17 x 21cm, *middling*, 35 x 29cm, acrylic on wallpaper (clockwise from top left).

*real gone*, 22 x 18cm, *bygones*, 29 x 22cm, *untitled*, 29 x 18cm, acrylic on wallpaper.

*this is it*, oil and acrylic on canvas, 122 x 91cm (clockwise from top left). P. 14-15

**Selma Parlour**

*Postcard*, 2017, oil on linen, 61 x 51cm. P. 2

**James Pimperton**

*Three States*, 2017 (installation view – Emmanuel Church, West Hampstead).

*Riding the Wave*, 2016, oil on panel, 22 x 18cm. P. 8-9

**Rebecca Molloy**

*Where There are Females There are Flowers*, 2017, film still. P. 12-13

**Alex Roberts**

*Midpoint I*, 2017, pigment and oil on silk, 120 x 100cm (detail, in progress, studio view).

Front and back cover.

*Late Night Traveller*, 2017, pigment and oil on silk, 80 x 70cm (detail). P. 5

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